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WASHINGTON TALK

Washington Times and Its Conservative Niche

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WASHINGTON, May 24 — Staff members of The Washington Times tell of how the newspaper's new editor, Arnaud de Borchgrave, sometimes prowls the newsroom late in the evening in blue silk pajamas, roused from the bed in his office by an idea that might help crack what he considers the liberal bias of many news organizations in general and the "incredible arrogance" of The Washington Post in particular.

In the two months that Mr. de Borchgrave has been in charge, his ideas have included offering a \$1 million reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi war criminal, and a front-page editorial announcing a drive by the paper to raise \$14 million for the Nicaraguan rebels after Congress refused more aid.

Such attention-attracting moves are only one aspect of the paper's declared mission of being a conservative alternative. But attention is important if the paper is to win significant visibility outside conservative circles, a problem journalism critics say has dogged it since it was founded three years ago by the Unification Church.

"To me, The Times seems to be saying, 'Look at me!,' but in fact very few people in Washington do," said Katherine Evans, editor of The Washington Journalism Review.

Reagan Reads It Each Day

Mr. de Borchgrave remains confident, saying: "The Washington Times is the first thing Ronald Reagan reads each morning. He called me up and told me so."

As further evidence of the paper's influence, Mr. de Borchgrave noted that when President José Napoleón Duarte of El Salvador came to town a few days ago the first newspaper he visited was The Washington Times.

As for circulation, though the church has equipped the paper with modern facilities and provides an annual subsidy estimated to be \$25 million, it has failed to attract wide readership. The paper, published Monday through Friday, had a March circulation of 75,354 copies in the Washington area, with 8,608 more copies distributed around the nation, according to a publishing statement by the Audit Bureau of Circulations. By comparison, circulation of The Washington Post was 771,253 daily and over a million Sunday.

Most journalists, academics and Government and political figures in Washington seem to think The Washington Times is unlikely ever to challenge The Post as a traditional, if conservative, daily in the manner of The Washington Star, whose closing prompted the creation of The Washington Times. Generally cited as reasons for its inability to make more headway are its identification with the church's leader, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon; the entrenchment of The Post and a sense that ideology often appears more important than news in the paper. A chronic lack of advertising suggests that it is likely to continue to depend on a subsidy.

Still, the paper has created a niche for itself in the capital's crowded journalistic marketplace, where almost every news organization of any size is represented. It is generally seen as a showcase for the evolution of conservative thought and perspective on the news, with more and more journalists and officials saying they read it for tips in that area and more and more of its articles appearing in the news summaries distributed widely in Government agencies and on Capitol Hill.

"They are frequently ahead on news of what's happening in conservative thinking," said David R. Gergen, a former communications director for President Reagan who is now a syndicated columnist. "And for conservatives it has become a valuable networking device that they use to talk back and forth and they turn to The Times when they want to get something out."

The paper sometimes seems to get significant news breaks from the Administration. Mr. Reagan's first interview after his re-election was with a reporter from The Washington Times. "A White House correspondent would not read it at his own peril," said Chris Wallace, who covers the White House for NBC News.

But while it thus has become a factor on the Washington journalism scene, as a basic provider of information and opinion it is said to remain in the second tier of news organizations, along with regional newspapers.

"Its visibility is low and its importance in the news chain is lower," said Michael J. Robinson, director of George Washington University's Media Analysis Project, which studies the effect of American journalism on politics and institutions.

Officials at The Washington Post,

The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press and United Press International say they regularly review The Washington Times for news leads and pick up important news items. For example, a recent article about Vernon A. Walters's complaints that he would not have the access he wanted as chief delegate to the United Nations was picked up by The Post, The New York Times and others.

Evidence of Liberal Bias

But Mr. de Borchgrave says other news organizations do not pick up nearly enough articles originating in his paper. He says this is evidence of a liberal bias.

As for his own politics, Mr. de Borchgrave, 58 years old, says he was a "Scoop Jackson Democrat" until the party's conservatives were cowed into silence by people with a "radical third-world ideology."

He has never been shy about his outspoken views about what should and should not appear in the press. His office confirmed that those views led to his being asked to resign from Newsweek in 1980 after 30 years as a foreign correspondent. Subsequently, before joining The Washington Times, he was co-author of "The Spike," a novel about reputed Soviet influence on this country's press.

Though the paper is clearly conservative, most journalists from other organizations say its news columns are not a mouthpiece for the Unification Church. The paper uses news agency articles to cover church issues, and Mr. de Borchgrave says he is guaranteed total editorial independence from the church.

In the view of many journalism critics, the paper's conservatism tends to show not so much in how articles are written but in what news is selected for publication and how prominently some articles are displayed. Articles regarding Soviet influence and intelligence-gathering efforts, for instance, are usually prominently displayed, as are articles involving Nicaragua and Cuba.

Explaining this approach to journalism, Mr. de Borchgrave says he wants The Washington Times to be like such European newspapers as Le Figaro, which reports the news from a conservative perspective in France.